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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIRUT 003908

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NSC FOR ABRAMS/DORAN/MARCHESE/HARDING

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [PTER](#) [LE](#) [SY](#)
SUBJECT: BERRI TO UNVEIL NEW INITIATIVE; CABINET FORMULA
APPEARS UNWORKABLE

Classified By: Jeffrey Feltman, Ambassador, per 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY AND COMMENT

11. (C) In back-to-back meetings on 12/28 with the U.S., French, and Saudi ambassadors, Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri revealed a "National Salvation Government" initiative that he proposed to announce publicly over the Eid al-Adha holiday. Describing Amr Moussa's diplomacy as dead, Berri claimed that he had not yet cleared his new proposal with his Hizballah partners. He hoped for international support in marketing the idea to March 14 leaders. While the devil is always in the details, in general the five tasks he assigns to his National Salvation Government are sensible and already included in various forms in other initiatives: finishing up the tribunal, approving Paris III reform measures, electing a new president (while rehabilitating Emile Lahoud throughout the remainder of his extended term), completing legislative electoral reform and discussing the possibility of early legislative elections (which Berri clearly does not want), and completing the process of renewing the constitutional court. But Berri's initiative will undoubtedly falter on its cabinet breakdown: a ten-member cabinet, with three from the March 14 majority, three from the March 8-Aoun opposition, and four "neutral" ministers. This would deprive the March 14 majority from even having a blocking minority, and the initial reactions from March 14 leaders to hints of Berri's proposal are predictably negative. We agree that Berri's proposal requires too many concessions from the March 14 majority and that Moussa's proposed 19-10-1 cabinet breakdown a far better deal. Nevertheless, we are encouraging our March 14 contacts not to slam the door on Berri so hard as to provoke a dangerous reaction from March 8-Aoun forces. However constrained Berri is by his Syrian-Iranian-Hizballah handcuffs, he seems eager to avoid street escalation. End summary and comment.

BERRI PROPOSES 10-MEMBER
"NATIONAL SALVATION GOVERNMENT"

12. (C) With promises of revealing a new initiative, Berri summoned the U.S., French, and Saudi ambassadors to back-to-back meetings on 12/28. In his meeting with Ambassador Feltman (the second of the series), Berri claimed that "you are only the second person to hear this idea," as he insisted that he had not shared the idea yet with his Hizballah and Aounist allies. Drawing parallels to a 1984 cabinet headed by Rashid Karami, Berri said that he wanted to solve the current political crisis through a 10-member "National Salvation Cabinet" consisting of three ministers

from the March 14 majority, three ministers from the March 8-Aoun opposition, and four "neutral" ministers.

13. (C) Unfolding a piece of paper with handwriting scrawled across it, he said that the cabinet, following Lebanon's complicated confessional formulas, would consist of two Sunnis, two Shias, a Druse, two Maronites, a Greek Orthodox, a Greek Catholic, and an Armenian. March 14 would pick the two Sunnis and the Druse. March 8 would pick the two Shias and one of the Maronites (who should be, Berri said, Michel Aoun). The remaining four Christians would be neutral, with the mechanism for their selection still undetermined. Fouad Siniora could remain as Prime Minister, although Berri hoped that the Hariri family would choose someone "less controversial" as PM. Someone like Bahia Hariri (sister of Rafiq, aunt of Sa'ad) would be good, Berri said, chuckling sheepishly (as if caught with his hand in the cookie jar) when the Ambassador noted that Bahia's continued election as a Sidon MP makes her dependent on Berri's support. As for the neutral ministers, Berri indicated that Zahle MP Ily Skaiff -- currently allied with Aoun, although showing some independence -- would be good, as would former nonagenarian Minister Fouad Boutros (who, despite sympathies in the direction of March 14, would be physically unable to maintain a rigorous cabinet schedule).

FIVE TASKS

14. (C) The National Salvation Cabinet would have five tasks, Berri continued:

-- Discuss the details of the Special Tribunal for Lebanon; make any needed adjustments; work with the UN to incorporate

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those adjustments; and submit the tribunal documents to parliament for ratification. The parliament would open in an extraordinary session to ratify the documents. When the Ambassador tried to draw Berri out on exactly what were the problems in the existing tribunal documents, Berri refused to be drawn out, claiming (implausibly) that, still annoyed with Siniora's handling of the issue, he had still not read the papers.

-- Work quickly to "save" Paris III. When the Ambassador noted that Paris III planning seems to be proceeding well and not in need of salvation, Berri shook his head. Paris III will require reforms. Reforms require new laws to be passed by Parliament. This requires agreement among the Lebanese.

-- Elect a new President of the Republic ("like we did with (Elias) Sarkis," who was also elected in advance) while simultaneously rehabilitating Emile Lahoud for the remainder of his term in office, until late November 2007. "You know I can't stand Lahoud," Berri said (a statement we believe has the virtue of being true), "but this has to do with the constitution -- it is better to have the president sign" the tribunal, laws, etc.

-- Complete the process of legislative electoral reform, by submitting to the parliament the draft election law developed earlier this year by the Boutros Commission. Parliament will discuss early elections. Elaborating on the latter point, Berri said that he did not want earlier parliamentary elections, and he knows that the March 14-dominated parliament would never agree. But, to satisfy some of the pro-Syrian and Aounist politicians, the topic has to be included among those to be discussed. "We can talk and talk and talk about it," he laughed.

-- Complete the cabinet and parliamentary process to appoint a new constitutional council.

15. (C) The Ambassador asked about the cabinet decree that has to accompany any proposed cabinet slate to the parliament

for the vote of confidence: would the cabinet decree for the National Salvation Government include the language in the existing decree on "protection of the Resistance" that March 14 leaders would no longer publicly endorse? Berri said that the cabinet decree should be "short and simple," concentrating on the five tasks before the government. "Let's not make this too complicated. We can't solve everything at once." The Ambassador asked whether Berri would be able to deliver Michel Aoun, given that the chronology of the five tasks seemed to preclude the possibility of an Aoun presidency. Without answering, Berri waved his hand dismissively, as if to indicate that Aoun did not matter.

MOUSSA'S PROPOSAL "DEAD"

16. (C) When the Ambassador noted that in many ways the Amr Moussa proposal seemed more attractive, Berri said that he "never" supported Moussa's 19-10-1 cabinet formulation: it would be "unconstitutional" for one minister not to vote. Under Berri's new initiative, the four neutral ministers could fulfill their constitutional roles fully, voting on issues as each saw fit. Moreover, Berri said, Moussa's initiative is "dead -- nobody likes it." The Ambassador said that it not how we understood the situation; it seemed to us that Berri's allies wanted to kill the initiative but that it still enjoyed much support. "No, that's not true," Berri responded; "nobody likes the idea." If Moussa returns in early January, he will discover that he has nothing to work with.

NO STREET ESCALATION

17. (C) The Ambassador asked Berri about some of the threats to escalate March 8-Aoun actions after the completion of the 'Eid al-Adha/New Year's holiday. Suddenly pointing upwards as if he remembered something, Berri said that, upon the announcement of the National Salvation Government, all protesters would leave downtown Beirut. And if Berri's initiative is not accepted by March 14 leaders? While admitting that he did not have other options, Berri rejected the idea that people would close down the roads or overrun the Grand Serail.

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SELLING THE IDEA

18. (C) The Ambassador asked Berri how he planned to market his initiative, which the Ambassador speculated would be an extremely hard sell to March 14 leaders. Berri said that, first, he needed to hear back from messengers he had sent that day to see Hizballah and Aounist representatives, to make sure that his own allies support the idea. He planned to use Saudi Ambassador Khoja (who came back prematurely from a Hajj trip upon Berri's request) to peddle the idea to the March 14 leaders. The Ambassador questioned why Berri could not speak directly with Fouad Siniora, Walid Jumblatt, Saad Hariri and others. Shaking his head, Berri said that direct talks would depend on knowing in advance that "we have something to work with." The Ambassador expressed skepticism that the proposed cabinet formulation would be acceptable to March 14 leaders but noted that, if there was Lebanese consensus behind a solution that preserved the tribunal and Lebanon's constitution, we would likely be supportive.

19. (C) Subsequently, the Ambassador met separately with Saad Hariri and Marwan Hamadeh, both of whom found much to criticize in Berri's proposal. While the five tasks looked reasonable, Hamadeh warned that "we have to watch the details to avoid a trap." As we would have expected, the breakdown in cabinet numbers is unacceptable to Hariri and Hamadeh. Both the U.S. and French ambassadors (who compared notes in a

separate 12/28 meeting) suggested to Hariri and Hamadeh that the door not be slammed shut in Berri's face so hard as to provoke a street reaction. When Berri makes his proposal public -- which could be as early as today -- we suggested, do not reject it out of hand but keep the dialogue going.

COMMENT

¶10. (C) Assuming the tribunal is approved before any cabinet change, Amr Moussa's proposal for a 19-10-1 cabinet split is far more attractive than Berri's new initiative. Even under Moussa's proposal, March 14 leaders have made some important concessions: giving up the two-thirds "super majority" needed for major decisions and agreeing to a commission to look again at the tribunal documents (and thus opening up the tribunal). There is also implicit acceptance that Lahoud will remain in office for the remainder of his term, even if early presidential elections occur. Now, Berri proposes to go even further, by stripping March 14 of even the blocking minority (one-third-plus-one) inside the cabinet. The March 14 majority would vanish from the executive branch. At this point, there is not even an ironclad guarantee that the tribunal will be approved or that the March 8-Aoun bloc will allow an acceptable presidential candidate to emerge. The only tangible benefit we see from Berri's proposal is the mere fact that it exists and that Berri seems determined not to rely on street escalation.

FELTMAN